Suvla Bay/*6 August, 1915-9 January, 1916*

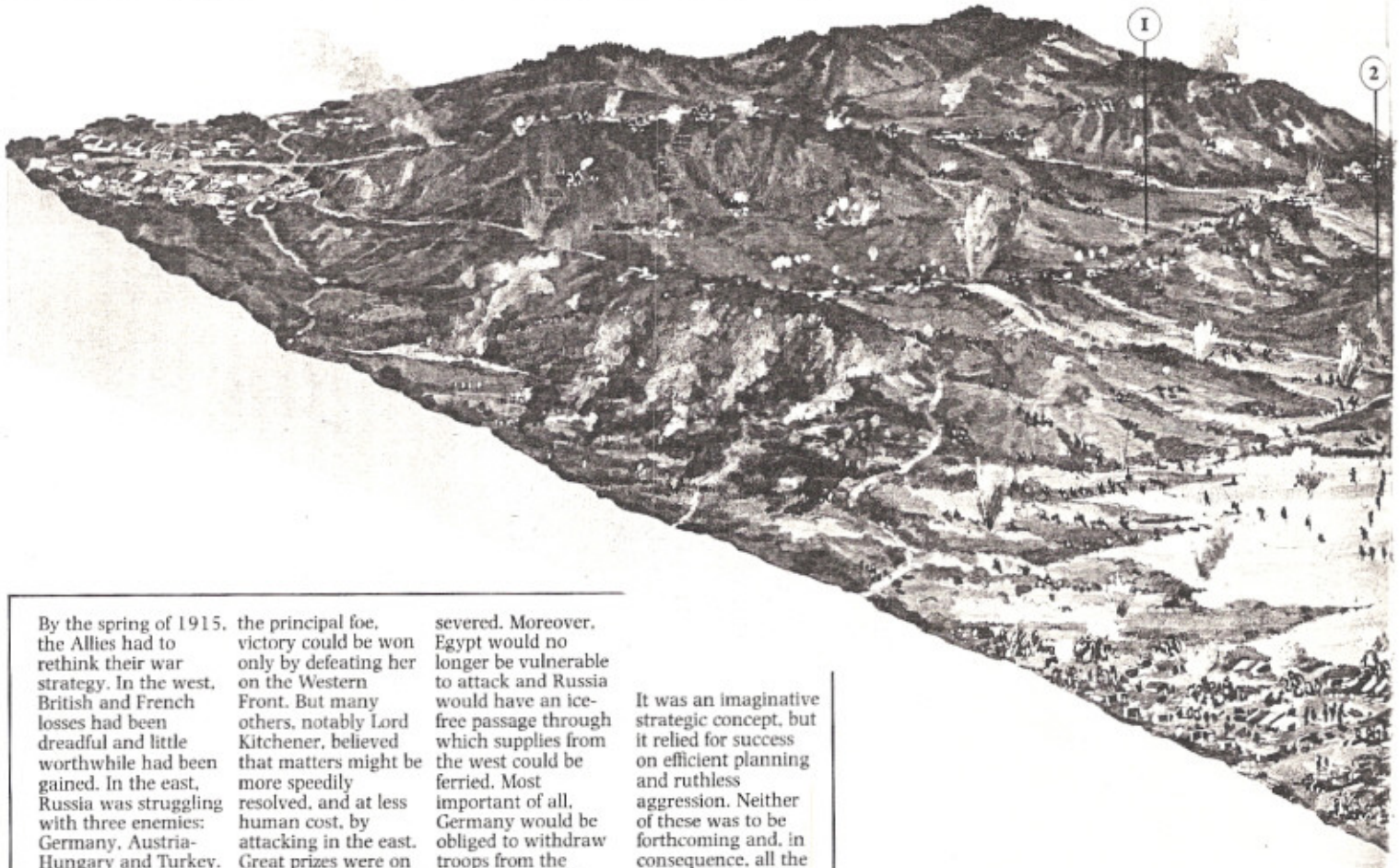
Mounting an attack on Gallipoli was one of the few imaginative concepts of the First World War, but the officers chosen for the highest echelons of command during the campaign were either past their prime or without fighting experience, sometimes both. They allowed the operation to wither and die through ignorance, mismanagement and stubbornness. The price paid in lost opportunities, wasted lives and human suffering was appalling.

The assault was designed to break the stalemate of trench warfare in France and Flanders by destroying the power of Turkey and thereby pulling German troops to the east. The Royal Navy might have achieved this single-handed by steaming through the narrow Dardanelles straits leading to Constantinople in November 1914, when the area was still lightly defended. Instead, British warships contented themselves with a bombardment of the shore batteries at the entrance to the straits to test the range of the enemy's guns. This succeeded only in alerting the Turks and their German commanders to the probability of further attacks in the area.

Three months later, in February 1915, the Royal Navy again appeared off the Dardanelles and found that the defences had been strengthened beyond recognition: there were now carefully laid minefields and well-sited guns, while at night the narrows were swept by searchlights.

Deciding to match might with might, Great Britain and France assembled a huge fleet, including 18 battleships, to force a passage to Constantinople. The fleet sailed perilously close to the coastal guns and sustained heavy losses: three capital ships were sunk and three crippled. The action was broken off. Unknown to the Allies, the Turks had almost exhausted their ammunition and the fleet could have proceeded to Constantinople unmolested. Naval commanders, however, claimed that they could not force the Dardanelles unless troops were first sent to occupy the Gallipoli Peninsula in force.

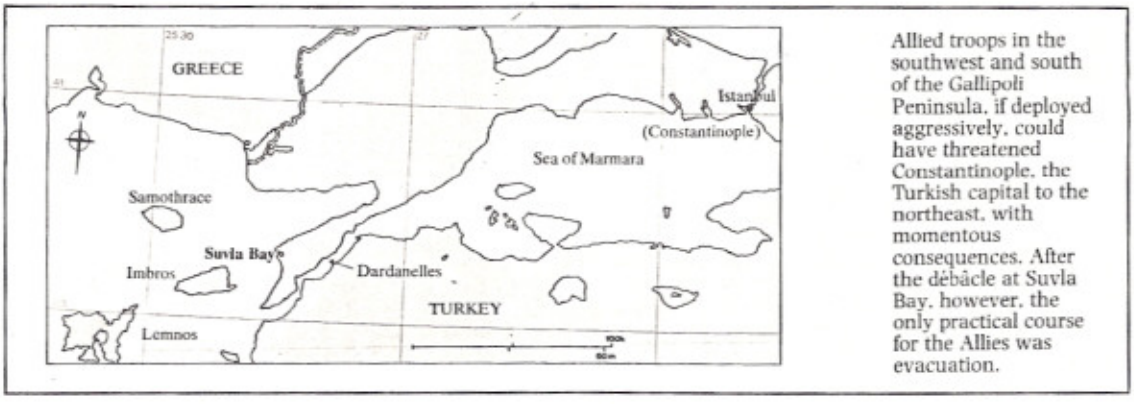
Field Marshal Lord Kitchener, the British Secretary of State for War, saw such a landing as repayment to Russia for her having eased pressure on the Western Front by attacking in the east in 1914, even though she was not then fully mobilized. Now the British and French could take pressure off Russia. Kitchener assembled an army of 70,000 men, many of whom had no battle experience. The force was commanded by Lieutenant-General Sir Ian



By the spring of 1915, the Allies had to rethink their war strategy. In the west, British and French losses had been dreadful and little worthwhile had been gained. In the east, Russia was struggling with three enemies: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Turkey. But what should be attempted to break the deadlock?

Senior French generals, and the French government itself, argued that, since Germany was the principal foe, victory could be won only by defeating her on the Western Front. But many others, notably Lord Kitchener, believed that matters might be more speedily resolved, and at less human cost, by attacking in the east. Great prizes were on offer—and the site for an attack was obvious: the Dardanelles. If the attack were successful, Turkey's communications with Germany would be severed. Moreover, Egypt would no longer be vulnerable to attack and Russia would have an ice-free passage through which supplies from the west could be ferried. Most important of all, Germany would be obliged to withdraw troops from the Western Front to assist Turkey, thereby giving the Allies numerical superiority and the opportunity to break the stalemate that was costing so many lives.

It was an imaginative strategic concept, but it relied for success on efficient planning and ruthless aggression. Neither of these was to be forthcoming and, in consequence, all the Allies achieved was to create another front of trench warfare as costly as that in the west.



Allied troops in the southwest and south of the Gallipoli Peninsula, if deployed aggressively, could have threatened Constantinople, the Turkish capital to the northeast, with momentous consequences. After the débâcle at Suvla Bay, however, the only practical course for the Allies was evacuation.

Troop positions at about 5 pm on 21 August. Smoke blew over the battlefield from fires started by artillery shells in the brush north of Chocolate Hill. Turkish artillery was strongly positioned. Some guns were on the forward slopes, others on the reverse slope of W Hill. Fire was massed against the 2nd Yeomanry Division as it crossed Salt Lake.

Scimitar Hill, 1, was defended by Turkish infantry, who were dug in along the crest in deep, often roofed, trenches. Snipers and skirmishers were positioned to their front. The Turks were deployed in the same way on Chocolate Hill, 2, and W Hill, 3.

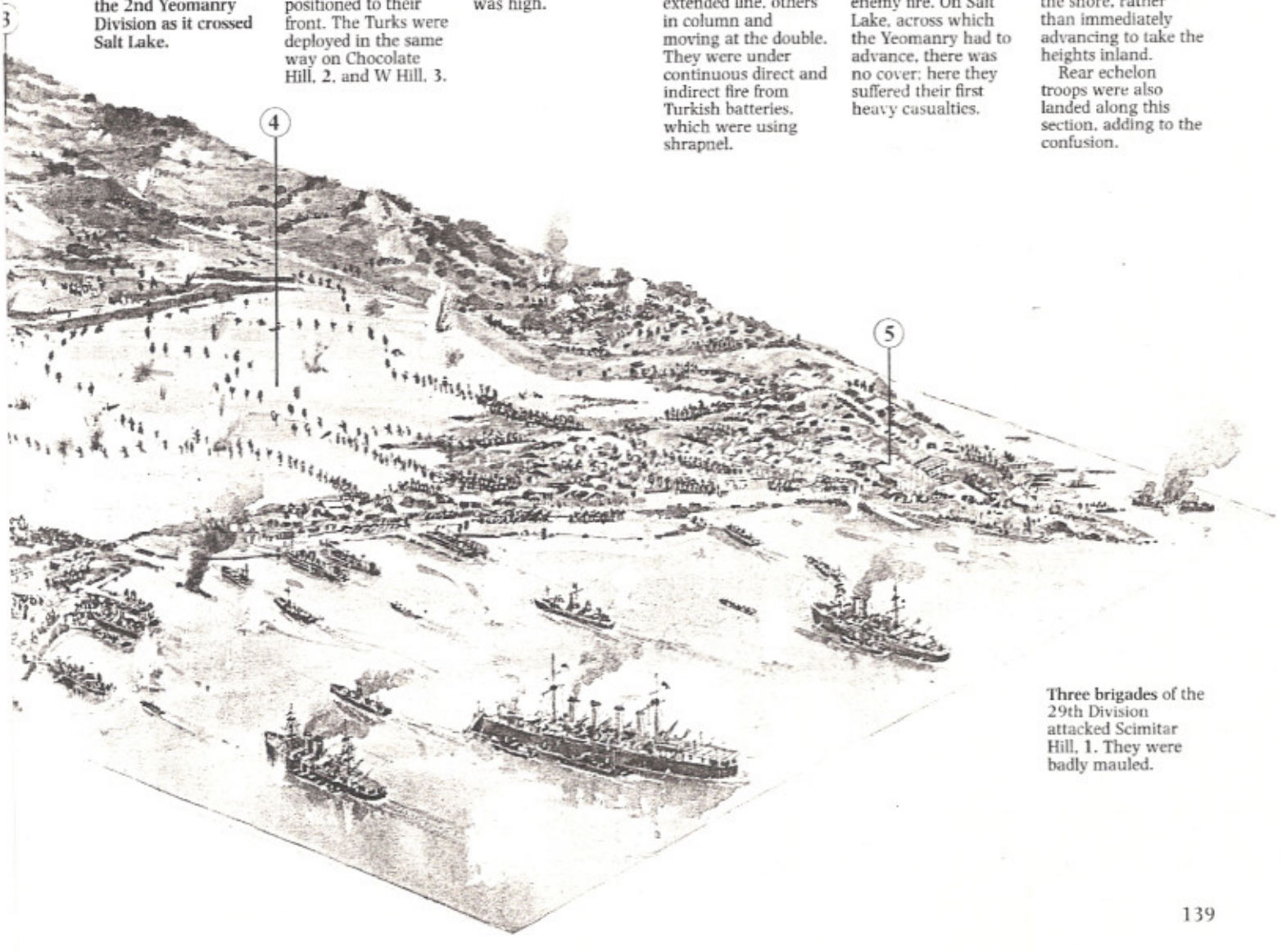
The 11th Division attacked Chocolate and W Hills. As with the attack on Scimitar Hill, little progress was made, but the cost in life was high.

The axis of advance of the dismounted 2nd Yeomanry Division lay across the dried-up Salt Lake area, 4. Some companies were in extended line, others in column and moving at the double. They were under continuous direct and indirect fire from Turkish batteries, which were using shrapnel.

Lala Baba, 5, the forming-up point for the British 2nd Yeomanry Division, was broken up by gullies, giving some protection from enemy fire. On Salt Lake, across which the Yeomanry had to advance, there was no cover; here they suffered their first heavy casualties.

General Stopford's army landed at Suvla Bay on the night of 6–7 August. Stores were dumped haphazardly, and the troops dug in along the shore, rather than immediately advancing to take the heights inland.

Rear echelon troops were also landed along this section, adding to the confusion.



Three brigades of the 29th Division attacked Scimitar Hill, 1. They were badly mauled.

Hamilton, aged 62, who had more active service to his credit than any other senior officer in the army, but who was reluctant to exercise authority over his generals, a failing that was to have disastrous consequences in the ensuing campaign.

To suggest that the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force was unprepared for its Gallipoli ordeal is an understatement. Kitchener held the Turkish army in such contempt that no serious efforts were made to study its methods, command structure, strength or dispositions, even though a major offensive against it was about to be launched. To make matters worse, maps of the peninsula (some taken from tourist guide books) were out of date and often inaccurate, and no detailed reconnaissance of the landing areas had been undertaken.

Just before dawn on 25 April 1915, Hamilton's soldiers, so badly served by their commanders, started going ashore for what they thought would be 'a great adventure'. Several diversionary landings were made to confuse the Turks and to cover the two main thrusts to be made: by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps in the south-west of the peninsula and by the 29th Division in the south.

The German commander of the Turkish forces in Gallipoli, General Liman von Sanders, had been expecting an invasion and had 84,000 men available to repel it. By luck rather than sound planning or accurate intelligence, most of Hamilton's army, which included a strong French contingent, landed in weakly held sectors. On only two beaches did his men come under heavy fire. Almost at once, however, Allied confusion and lack of cohesion, which were to typify the entire campaign, passed the advantage to the enemy. Even though the way was open for a rapid advance to occupy dominating hills, there was reluctance to achieve more than a secure bridgehead.

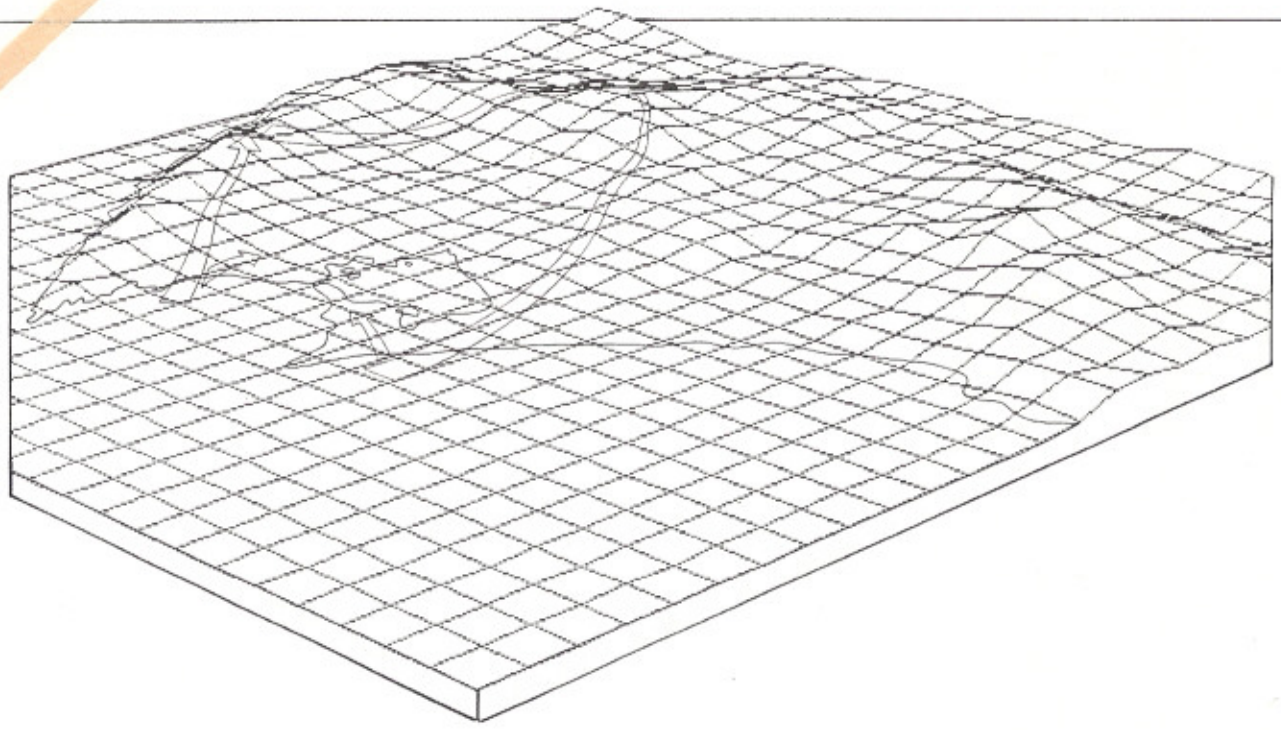
British officers walked unhindered to the commanding village of Krithia and up the 250-m (700-ft) heights of Achi Baba, but then returned to their lines to await orders. By the time instructions to push forward arrived, the Turks were in position. In the weeks ahead, thousands of lives were to be lost trying to take these two objectives, both of which would earlier have fallen easily, without cost.

What had been envisaged as a swift, decisive action to secure the peninsula degenerated into the horrifying conditions of trench warfare, like those on the Western Front, almost from the first day.

As casualties began to mount in the sweltering, fly-infested beachheads, the inadequacy of Allied preparations to care for

Sir Ian Hamilton, seated left, was photographed with Vice-Admiral John M. de Robeck, the British naval commander, flanked by the French naval and army leaders, *above*. Kitchener appointed Hamilton with the words, 'If you do [capture Constantinople] you will have won not only a campaign but the war.' Hamilton, however, rather than take an active part at Gallipoli, preferred his H.Q. on an offshore island.

In contrast, the German Field Marshal, Liman von Sanders, facing the camera, *top*, was a decisive commander, whose orders, often ruthless but instantly obeyed, prevented an Allied advance up the peninsula.



For three grim months after the landings in the Gallipoli Peninsula, Allied forces were held in check by the Turks. Hamilton, the Commander-in-Chief, determined to break the deadlock. A fresh corps was to land at Suvla Bay to the north of the Anzac Corps, and the two forces would then advance and link up on the dominating heights of the Sari Bair Hills. Once this had been achieved, Hamilton would be well placed to push forward to the Dardanelles and sever the peninsula. It was a promising concept—on paper.

Anzac troops at Anzac Bay used equipment devised in the trenches to allow soldiers to snipe at the Turks without exposing themselves to retaliatory fire. A standard .303 Lee-Enfield rifle, with a wire trigger pull, is attached to a periscope. Behind the rifleman, another soldier is using a trench periscope to scan Turkish positions.

General Sir Ian Hamilton inspecting troops at Kephalos Camp, a staging area on the Isle of Imbros. Despite heat, flies and dust, battalion parades such as this were common in the preparatory phases of the campaign. Within a few days, these smartly turned out soldiers were in the gruelling, make-shift conditions of the front line.

the wounded became painfully exposed. Too few hospital ships had accompanied the expedition, so animal transports, their stable decks uncleaned, were pressed into service to help evacuate the worst cases. On one such voyage, the only medical man on board was a veterinary officer.

For the next three murderous months, the Australians and New Zealanders grimly defended their slender foothold on Gallipoli, a mere 400 acres of steep, scrub-covered gullies and ridges. Farther south, the 29th Division, the Royal Naval Division and the French repeatedly hurled themselves against the heights that, but for their commanders' irresolution, might have been taken without loss. After failing for the third time to take Krithia and Achi Baba head-on, General Hamilton admitted in a report to Kitchener that frontal attacks in force were 'madness'. It had taken him a long time to learn the lesson.

Hamilton then planned to break out from the Anzac bridgehead. A fresh corps was to be landed at Suvla Bay to the north to protect the Australians' and New Zealanders' left as they advanced to outflank the Turks and capture the Sari Bair Hills. Once the Suvla force took the ridges to their front and linked with the Anzacs on Sari Bair, Hamilton would be poised to cut the peninsula in two, for it was only 13 km (8 mls) wide at this point and was dominated by high ground.

The plan had much to recommend it. It was doomed to failure, however, from the moment Lieutenant-General Sir Frederick Stopford was brought out of retirement to command the Suvla landings. He was elderly, in poor health, had never led troops in battle and knew nothing of Gallipoli. Solely on grounds of seniority, he was placed in command of IX Corps' twenty-two battalions, which would form the hinge on which the success or failure of the Anzac breakout would turn.

How highly Hamilton regarded his Suvla scheme may be gauged from his efforts to keep it secret. Troops in the staging areas were forbidden even to speculate on their destination. Stopford himself did not know where he was going until a fortnight before the landings. On the night of the attack, 6–7 August, there were officers in the boats heading for the beaches who had not been told their objectives and who had no maps.

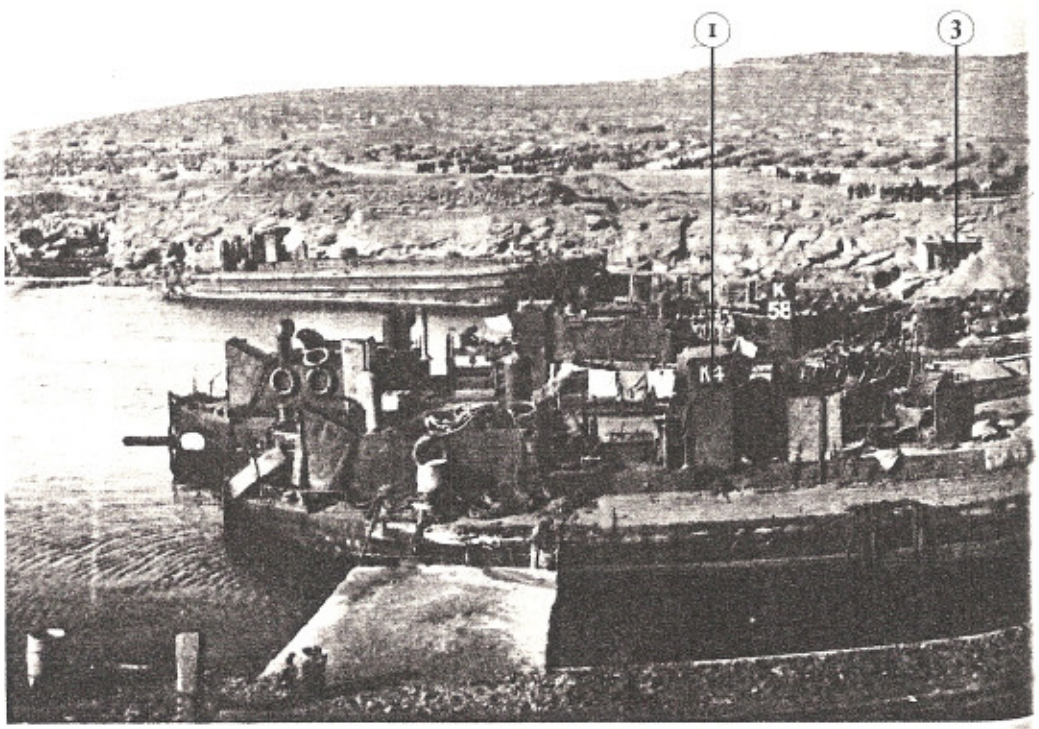
All was muddle and indecision from the outset. Some units were set down on the wrong beaches, while other landing areas became chaotic because too many men had been put ashore too quickly in the darkness; supplies were dumped indiscriminately, and all the while anxious officers milled about seeking clarification of orders.

This general view of Suvla Bay shows the new motor lighters running up to the jetty to unload fodder and straw for the horses and mules.

The wheelhouses, 1, of the barges were protected by armour-plate against sniper fire. The Turks were excellent marksmen.

A field ambulance park, 2, was sited close to the jetty. Since the Allies had not expected such heavy casualties, there were insufficient hospitals and hospital ships.

Dug-outs, 3, along the shore were primitive, since they had to be made with whatever materials were available.



Fatigue parties resting at Suvla Bay, *left*. The dug-out in the foreground was more for protection from the sun than from enemy fire. Some of the resting soldiers wrapped the bolts of their rifles in rags to protect them from dust.

In the deep water of Suvla Bay, British naval and merchant ships could come in close to land, *right*. Barges ferried in supplies, while troops led pack-horses down to the shore to carry the stores inland.

Boxes of rations, 4, were dumped indiscriminately. They usually contained bully beef and biscuits, so the soldiers' diet was monotonous and badly balanced.

Stores already unloaded, **5,** lay on the quay awaiting collection. As with everything else in the campaign, supply arrangements lacked organization.

British, Empire and French troops wore regulation uniforms, which were inappropriate for the intense heat prevailing at Suvla Bay.

Beyond the ridge, 6, a couple of kilometres away, were the Turkish positions, so close that snipers had an uninterrupted view of the unloading process. But the Allied troops' proximity to the shore meant, at least, that supplies, once claimed, could be taken to the units quickly.

A stretcher party, *above*, carries a wounded comrade to the jetty to await transfer to a hospital ship. Allied medical facilities were hopelessly inadequate throughout the campaign.

Suvla Bay/4

Instead of immediately deploying in strength to occupy the hills around Suvla in support of the attacking Anzacs, most of IX Corps remained in the vicinity of the bay. Australians and New Zealanders, who had been fighting hard and had made some progress, could see the troops at Suvla and did not understand why they were not by now advancing.

Stopford was so intent on getting his raw soldiers ashore that he overlooked the purpose for which they had been landed. Meanwhile, on the high ground, the German commander of a hastily organized force of 1,500 Turks guarding the Suvla area must have been astonished at his good fortune. Reporting the surprise invasion to von Sanders, he remarked on the timidity of the overwhelming forces to his front. While he waited for reinforcements, his riflemen picked off British soldiers and had soon killed or wounded more than their own strength. Still there was no assault.

At Turkish general headquarters, von Sanders displayed the decisive ruthlessness so foreign to his opponents: he summarily dismissed a divisional commander who said he could not reinforce the Suvla ridges until 9 August because his men were too tired. In his place he put Colonel Mustapha Kemal, a tough, uncompromising Turk, who immediately ordered the exhausted infantry forward to plug the gap.

Despite an optimistic message from Stopford on 8 August, suggesting that worthwhile gains were being made, Hamilton dispatched an aide to see for himself and to report back. The Commander-in-Chief had his worst suspicions confirmed when his staff officer wirelessed: 'Just been ashore where I found all quiet. No rifle fire, no artillery fire, and apparently no Turks. IX Corps resting. Feel confident that golden opportunities are being lost and look upon situation as serious.'

Hamilton reached Suvla as quickly as he could and discovered that little progress had indeed been made. The majority of the troops was either relaxing or bathing; Stopford himself was asleep.

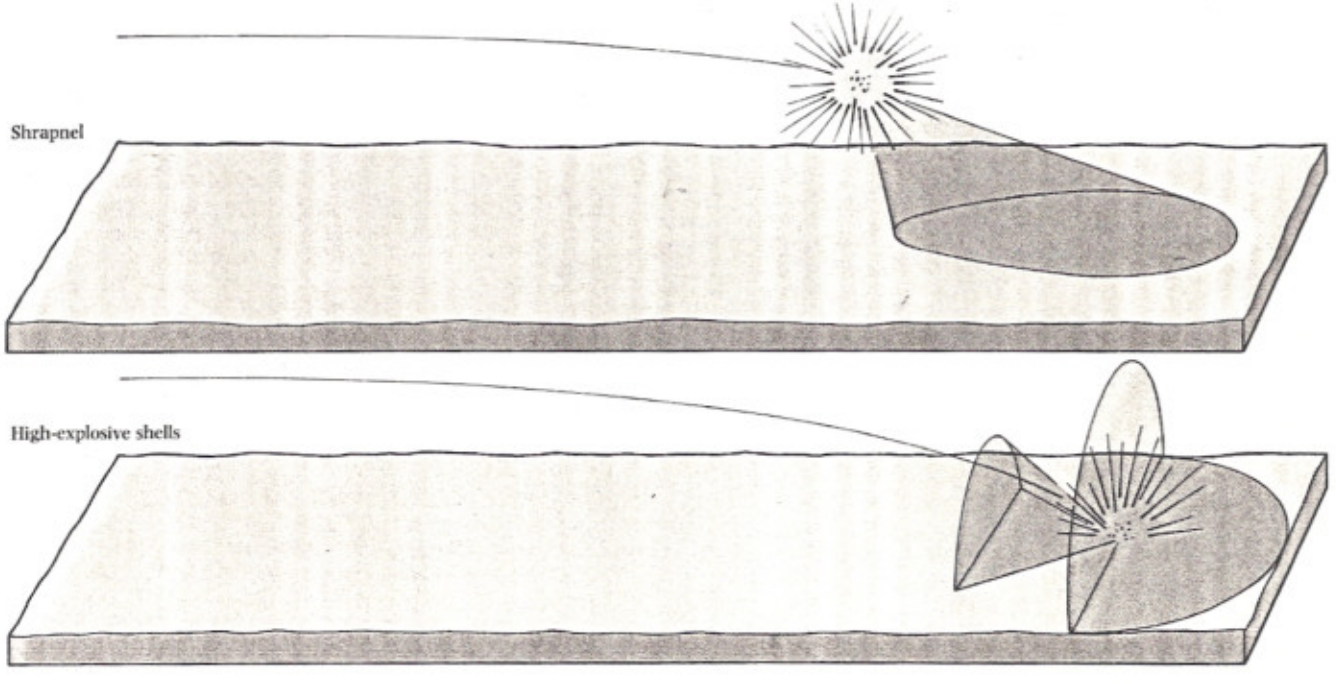
When reminded of the paramount importance of securing the encircling hills, Stopford replied that his men were hot and tired, there had been difficulties with water and other supplies and not enough guns were ashore. He would attack next morning. This was small comfort for the worn-down Anzacs, who had been fighting for months in dreadful conditions.

Leaving Stopford on board the ship that served as his headquarters, Hamilton went ashore. There he found the same indolence among senior officers. In a last attempt to prevent the collapse of his plan, he uncharacteristically issued a direct order for a brigade to advance to the main ridges and dig in on the crest. It was too late: Colonel Mustapha Kemal had arrived there first.

Between 9 and 11 August, when Hamilton reported to Kitchener that most of the troops were 'strolling about as if it was a holiday', the Turks consolidated their positions. On the 15th, the feckless Stopford, who had resorted to blaming subordinates and an alleged lack of offensive spirit in his Territorial divisions for his failures, was finally relieved of his command. His nine-day sojourn at Suvla had been disastrous.

In a letter to the Secretary of State for War a few days later, Herbert Asquith, the Prime Minister, wrote bitterly: 'I have read enough to satisfy me that the generals and staff engaged in the Suvla part of the business ought to be court-martialled and dismissed from the army.'

Yet even now the tragedy of Suvla Bay had not ended. Shortly after Asquith wrote



Shrapnel, invented by General H. Shrapnel (1761–1842) during the Peninsular War, comprised a hollow cannister containing lead pellets, which were scattered in a shower by a bursting charge set off by a time fuse. In its earlier forms, when fuses were often imperfect, shrapnel was equipped with a device that would cause it to explode on impact.

High-explosive shells relied on impact blast, as well as fragmentation, to destroy troops in the open. Some shells at Gallipoli incorporated a fuse that delayed explosion; others could be discharged, like shrapnel, in an overhead burst, violently expelling a cone of bullets.

his letter, the new commander of IX Corps, Major-General H. de Lisle, set about attacking the ridges on 21 August.

With the blessing of his Commander-in-Chief, who had evidently forgotten about the 'madness' of frontal attacks, de Lisle launched the greater part of three divisions against strongly defended heights—in hot, but unseasonably cloudy weather. The results were bloody and predictable.

By late afternoon, when the attack was faltering, de Lisle called up his reserve, the 2nd Yeomanry Division, and ordered it to break the Turkish line. Before these dismounted cavalry regiments from the shires of England could reach the front, they had to march across the white, dried-up expanse of Salt Lake—a perfect target for Turkish artillery. In the dusk, their ranks thinned by gunfire, the troopers stormed the hills. It was a gallant attempt, but they were repulsed with heavy losses. So ended the biggest, but mercifully the last, battle fought on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Like all the others, it had gained nothing.

Sir Ian Hamilton, still groping for victory amid the stalemate of trench warfare, was recalled on 15 October. His successor, Lieutenant-General Sir Charles Monro, on assessing the dismal situation in this inhospitable corner of European Turkey, recommended evacuation. By 9 January 1916, there were no Allied soldiers on Gallipoli save the dead.

The cost to both sides had been high. Of the 480,000 British, Commonwealth and French troops who served in this incompetently conducted campaign, more than 250,000 became casualties. The Turks admitted to almost identical losses, but some estimates place their figure much higher.

In war-weary Great Britain, the successful evacuation was hailed as some kind of victory, much as that from Dunkirk would be 24 years later. The truth was that the Dardanelles remained untaken and the Turkish army, that Kitchener derided, still occupied the ridges of Gallipoli.

Stores and equipment were offloaded on the foreshore and then transported by mule cart to the waiting troops.

Territorial gunners of the 52nd Lowland Division firing a 5-in howitzer at Suvla Bay. This artillery piece, one of the most effective guns deployed during the campaign, was capable of firing about 9.5 km (6 mls). The two gunners in the foreground are setting the fuses, while the gun commander, known as No. 1, observes a shell's impact. These soldiers are in non-regulation dress, illustrating the makeshift conditions prevailing throughout the campaign.

For the Allies, failure in the Dardanelles was calamitous; the losses had been grievous. Moreover, Turkey remained active on Germany's side, and the straits to the Black Sea were still closed. Russia thus remained separated from and unsupplied by her allies, and, in 1917, following the Bolshevik Revolution, she withdrew from the war. The most immediate consequence, however, was that those senior officers who advocated a second front to save lives in France had lost the argument. Because of the fiasco at Gallipoli, Great Britain and France became committed to more years of trench warfare on the Western Front, years that would claim hundreds of thousands of lives.